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Art and Politics in (Post)communism

The Transformation of Institutions and Artistic Practices in Central and Eastern Europe

CATERINA PREDA

The selection of articles published in this special issue on art and politics in (post)communism shows the plurality of foci and approaches the study of art and politics entails. The interrogations this special issue addresses situate communist art and culture in their connections to politics in the postcommunist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. "How were artistic institutions transformed by the changes of regime?" and "How did the double transition (political and economic) affect the artistic domain?" are the questions that look at the institutional transformations and to which the articles of Elena Arhire (the case of Romanian Council of Cinematography) and Cristina Stoenescu (Union of Visual Artists in Romania) provide partial answers. Artistic practices and discourses are analyzed by such interrogations as "How are artistic discourses transformed in the aftermath of communism?" and "How is the communist past deconstructed by artists?". The articles signed by Simon Bell and Amy Charlesworth can offer interesting perspectives on such topics. Different artistic mediums are tackled: film (Poamă and Andreescu's articles), visual arts (Tunali, Bell, Charlesworth, Stoenescu) and several theoretical frameworks are used. A further article, that of Alina Asavei, compares the meanings of "political art", both under state-socialism and during the democratization process.

Moreover, the reviews included in this special issue continue this attempt to situate the study of art and politics during postcommunism by providing a theoretical background. Reviews of works by contemporary philosophers and theoreticians are included: Jacques Rancière (*Dissensus: on Politics and Aesthetics* and *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*), Michael Shapiro (*Cinematic Geopolitics* and *The Time of the City: Politics, Philosophy, and Genre*), and Boris Groys (*Art Power*). Likewise, an important review presents the work of the art critic Piotr Piotrowski (*In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989*). Several Romanian volumes published recently (Cristian Vasile, *Literatura și artele în România comunistă: 1948-1953*, Ioana Macrea-Toma, *Privileghenția: Instituții literare în comunismul românesc*, and Anca Benera, *Materie și istorie. Monumentul public și distopiile lui*), further help to situate the postcommunist problematic from the perspective of the study of the relationship of art and politics in the Romanian case.

Furthermore, this special issue is part of a wider attempt to theorize the relation between art and politics, especially in dictatorial and post-dictatorial settings¹. Along

¹ See in this sense my PhD thesis which theorizes the relationship between art and politics in modern dictatorships through a discussion of two extreme cases, those of Chile and Romania. Caterina PREDA, *Dictators and Dictatorships Artistic Expressions of the Political: Romania and Chile (1970s-1989) No pasó nada...?*, Dissertation.com, Florida, 2009.

with the course on Art and politics¹ organized at the Department of Political Sciences, University of Bucharest since 2006, this effort to theoretically structure the study of art and politics welcomes a variety of methods.

Theoretical and Institutional Landmarks of the Study of Art and Politics

Some basic questions can be asked in regard to the theoretical approach advanced here: What is art and politics? How to study this relationship? and How to study it in the period of democratic reconstruction?

First of all, "art and politics" is a wide-ranging (sub)field of political science, still "under construction" with several topics being developed and stemming from several perspectives. There are also different focuses: institutions (including cultural policies, cultural management, and artistic institutions), artworks per se, and the artists. There are of course different emphases in relation to the type of artistic expression studied: visual arts, literature, cinematography, theater, dance or music².

From a strict perspective of political science, "politics and the art", as a subfield, has developed especially since the 1980s onward. In the North American case, the focus was placed on artistic practices in democracies as a new space for political theory enrichment. As Maureen Whitebrook recalls:

"Over the past 20 years or so, American political science has shown some interest in the way in which politics and literature might be connected as an aid to political understanding [...] a newsletter among 200 political scientists circulated and regular panels at APSA meetings were held as well as an attempt to form a politics and literature section in the APSA"³.

Additionally, Whitebrook was one of the founders, in 1995, of the Politics and the Arts Standing Group inside the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) that meets now annually and organizes its own conferences inside or outside the ECPR, administers a newsletter (Polarts) and publishes its works⁴. This line of study has been elaborated primarily in relation to the literary field: "the narrative turn" followed by the studies of Alasdair Mac Intyre, Richard Rorty and Charles Taylor. Recently, it also included visual arts practices: film, photography, visual arts in general.

¹ Art(s) et politique(s), course for the undergraduates in the French Department of the University of Bucharest organized annually since 2006 during one semester of the academic year.

² My main references here relate to either literary expressions or visual arts.

³ Maureen WHITEBROOK, "Introduction", in IDEM (ed.), *Reading Political Stories. Representations of Politics in Novels and Pictures*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Boston, 1992, p. 2, n. 1, p. 21.

⁴ For the history of the Polarts group see: <http://www.jyu.fi/yhtfil/polarts/meetings.html> (accessed 31.10.2011). At the ECPR General conference held in Reykjavik in August 2011 there was an entire section dedicated to "Politics and the Arts in a time of crisis and anxiety" with five panels: Artful practices of resistance; New pathways to knowledge: combining arts and social science research; Political symbols between impact and intentions; Politics and the arts in the digital age and Senses of violence?

This diverse group of researchers and research topics is loosely institutionalized through several meetings organized inside the American Political Science Association (APSA) – “politics and literature”, “politics, literature, and film” sections – and the ECPR conferences – Polarts. A further site for the investigation of this relationship is found inside the Social Theory, Politics and the arts (STP&A) conferences organized since 1974. The STP&A conferences have likewise included sporadically¹ several panels closer to this approach of “art and politics” investigating “how the arts were influenced by politics and vice versa”, as well as analyzing the “links between art and society”². Arnold Foster registered the importance of the year 1983 since when those that study the connections between politics and policy have become more influential inside the STP&A conferences, as well as the importance granted to the study of “the influence of society on art”³.

The study of art and its importance for the political has been largely based on Marxist theories and this although Marx did not elaborate an aesthetic theory. Recently, Post-Marxism and neo-Marxist approaches of the way art reacts to the political have dominated the studies of “art and politics”. The Frankfurt School in particular has developed an understanding of the role of art in its relation with the constant transformation of the contemporary society and its deployment of mass cultural phenomena. In this sense, Adorno and Horkheimer, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* argued for the subsistence of negation only inside “high art” expressions in this uniform society. “For Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and Lowenthal the new techniques of cultural production and reception had to be understood in the context of the decline of autonomous art and the rise of what Horkheimer and Adorno call ‘culture industry’” and their critique stems from the consideration that “the new products of mass culture served to enhance political control and to cement mass audiences to the status quo”⁴. The possibility art holds to convey a different message is further underlined by Adorno when he states that art is autonomous as well as a *fait social*. Through this double stance it can criticize society and take a position even when ignoring the real; the power of art, for Adorno, resides in its capacity to negate reality⁵. Walter Benjamin has been prominent in the recent studies of visual arts and their connections with the political through his conceptualization of the lost “aura” of the artwork. As he writes, “in the epoch of technical reproduction, what disappears in the artwork is its aura”, that is “its uniqueness”⁶. Moreover, for Benjamin, to the aestheticization of the political invented by fascism, communism responded through art’s politicization⁷.

¹ In 2011 at the 37th STP&A conference organized at the University of Kentucky there was no panel specifically dedicated to art and politics, but there were several papers presented on connected topics included in separate panels. See the program of the conference: <http://www.stpaconference.com/home.html> (accessed 04.11.2011).

² Carrie LEE, “Twenty Five Years of the Conference of Social Theory, Politics, and the Arts”, in Valerie B. MORRIS, David B. PANKRATZ (eds.), *The Arts in A New Millennium: Research and the Arts Sector*, Praeger, Westport, Connecticut, London, 2003, pp. 211-223/p. 215.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 211.

⁴ David HELD, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1980, p. 88.

⁵ Theodor ADORNO, *Teoria estetică*, Romanian transl. by Andrei Corbea, Gabriel H. Decuble, Cornelia Esianu, Paralela 45, Pitești, 2006, pp. 11, 321.

⁶ Walter BENJAMIN, “L’Oeuvre d’art à l’époque de sa reproductibilité technique”, in IDEM, *Oeuvres III*, Gallimard, Paris, 2000, pp. 276, 273. Our translation from French.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 316.

Similarly essential is the relationship between art and politics as defined by Jacques Rancière, in terms of *dissensus*. Dissensus represents the essence of politics as "the manifestation of a gap in the sensible", as well as "the kernel" of what Rancière labels "the aesthetic regime" – "a sensible mode of being specific to artistic products"¹. "Art and politics each define a form of dissensus, a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible" and the role of art is to "reconfigur[e] the distribution of the sensible which defines the common of a community, to introduce new subjects and objects, to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers, those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals"². Rancière does not consider politically committed art as a category of art and he states that "aesthetics has its own politics, or its own meta-politics" and furthermore that "politics has its aesthetics, and [conversely that] aesthetics has its politics"³.

In the Polarts framework, and as part of the "politics and the arts" group are authors that dwell into the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jacques Rancière or Roland Barthes, and connect their ideas to visual arts examples. These works include the writings of: Davide Panagia (sensation and its roles in the study of politics), Michael Shapiro (from International Relations to cinematography and politics, the new cities and the political), Kia Lindroos (visuality, cinematic narrative), and Dana Arieli Horowitz (Israeli and Palestinian art, mainly photography) etc.

Although art has always developed in tight relationship to the political, it is only with the advent of totalitarian regimes that a political analysis developed so as to study it. This was so because totalitarian regimes were the first to intervene in the artistic space and dictate their rules to art and artists to such an important extent. Before the political had only touched upon art punctually through art patronage and the establishment of institutions, academies in the 16th and 17th centuries, and museums in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the 19th century, the modern state continued in some cases the role of the monarchs and supported some artistic activities. It is only in the 20th century that art's relations with other fields of human experience began to be investigated. Art was previously analyzed from the perspective of aesthetics that deals with the reception of art, the beautiful and taste, as well as from that of art theory, concerned with the form and content of art works; additionally, art history has dealt with the succession of artists, styles and schools. In the second half of the 20th century the analysis of art became increasingly impregnated by social sciences which dwelt on structuralism and post-structuralism, semiotics and deconstruction, cultural theory, postcolonial studies and postmodernism. Additionally, economics (the study of markets and artist studios, merchants etc.) and psychoanalysis (influencing the theories of reception of art), as well as other contextual approaches (Marxism and feminism for example) were used to study art. In France, art was analyzed, since the beginning of the 20th century from a sociological perspective focusing on the establishment of an autonomous artistic space (*champ* in the sense of Bourdieu) through the creation of specific institutions⁴. It is only recently that "the political" has been included in studies about art, still from a sociological point of view. In this sense,

¹ Jacques RANCIÈRE, *Dissensus*, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, 2010, pp. 38, 140; IDEM, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Continuum, London, New York, 2010, p. 22.

² IDEM, *Dissensus...cit.*, p. 140; IDEM, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, Polity Press, Malden, MA, 2009, pp. 24-25.

³ IDEM, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, cit, pp. 60, 62.

⁴ Bruno PEQUIGNOT, *Sociologie des arts*, Armand Colin, Paris, 2009.

there is a variety of studies about art and politics in the francophone space – mainly in France and Belgium – which deal with artworks and artists and the way these are connected. These essays stem from a previous interest of the authors in Marxist theory and aesthetics which they updated to present day trends and artists. See for example the collective volumes edited by Jean March Lachaud: *Art, culture et politique* (1999), *Art et politique* (2006) *Changer l'art. Transformer la société. Art et politique 2* (2009) or other edited volumes such as *Arts et pouvoirs* (edited by Marc Jimenez in 2007) or *Les formes contemporaines de l'art engagé* (edited by Eric Van Esche in 2007).

The artist has an important role to play in the political realm. The concept of the artist as a genius was put forward since the end of the 17th century, using his imagination, in the 18th century during Romanticism, being "isolated and autonomous in relation to society...has his own world, and is a being in his natural state"¹. The role of the artist evolved once modern art brought forward a new type of artist. Since the beginning of the 20th century modern art was torn between two poles: the art created for itself – art for art's sake, aesthetic only – and art that tries to change life as proclaimed by the avant-gardes, to alter reality and transform it into a work of art (*l'artiste engagé*). Because of their status, increasingly at the modern epoch, artists became those that reject the "bourgeois world and its values" and stress "the power to transform society and daily life through the use of art"². After politics has taken over artistic means so as to change society, as the Soviet model of Socialist Realism testifies, it is only in the 1960s and 1970s that artists are again found to react to the world and once more "art makes sense politically" (Beuys and his enlarged field of art)³. Or, as Daniel Van Der Gucht considers, there are in the 20th century two paradigms almost opposed; in the period after 1968 a first absolutist paradigm of political art "politics is everything/art is everything" is replaced with a new relativist paradigm "everything is political/everything is art – with the element added by Beuys, everybody is an artist"⁴. Therefore, the *role of the artist* is paramount in both democratic and dictatorial regimes as Negash writes,

"without a doubt artists and intellectuals have always been in an advantageous and privileged position to chronicle events, preserve the collective memory, perform the role of teacher and seer, and become social critics [...] Artists record and chronicle the events and deeds of all time, construct and reconstruct realities as they imagine them [...] It is these representations that become part of our experience"⁵.

The role of art in the understanding of the political is paramount. Murray Edelman supports the idea that artworks shape our beliefs: "People perceive and conceive in the

¹ Laura ESQUIVEL, *L'autonomie de l'art en question. L'art en tant qu'Art*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2008, p. 118.

² Jean-Marc LACHAUD, "Art et politique aujourd'hui: organiser le pessimisme!", in L'Université des arts, *Arts et pouvoir*, Klincksieck, Séminaire Interarts de Paris 2005-2006, 2007, pp. 77-93/p. 79.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 84.

⁴ Daniel VAN DER GUCHT, "Pour en finir avec la mythologie de l'artiste politique: de l'engagement à la responsabilité", in Eric VAN ESSCHE (ed.), *Les formes contemporaines d'art engagé*, La lettre volée, Collection Essais, Bruxelles, 2007, pp. 59-68/p. 84.

⁵ Girma NEGASH, "Art Invoked: A Mode of Understanding and Shaping the Political", *International Political Science Review*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2004, pp. 185-201, pp. 191-192.

light of narratives, pictures and images"¹. The strongest argument made by Edelman is that art "constructs realities and so demonstrates how easily that can be done. Art therefore may question the validity of the official or commonly disseminated version of reality"². Edelman also stresses how democracy can be fostered by art because the latter "excites minds and feelings...and art can thus foster a reflective public that is less inclined to act in a herd spirit"³. This latter argument is similarly found in Charles Hersch' *Democratic Artworks Politics and the Arts from Trilling to Dylan* (1998), in which he argues, that "artworks can politically educate citizens and thus contribute to democracy" because "imagination is central to political education [and] artworks are ideal teachers"⁴. Another important role played by art is underlined by Joel Kassiola who advanced the concept of "virtual experience" which he borrowed from Susanne Langer who used it first for the visual arts. Kassiola argues that "this enlarging of human experience through virtual experience is the major contribution of literature to the quintessential normative political question of how we ought to act politically"⁵. Lee Sigelman puts forward another concept that is useful in understanding the way the relationship between art and politics functions. Sigelman rejects the idea according to which "art mirrors life...and fiction reflects society" and believes "a more appropriate metaphor is that of prism, which decomposes ordinary white light into the colors of the spectrum...transforms whatever passes through it into something new and different"⁶. In fact Sigelman too stresses the importance of imagining other worlds that fiction underlines:

"In order to understand the world we live in, it is often illuminating to begin by imagining a very different world. Thus theorists like Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau began by placing man in a state of nature...because the conditions they imagined in the state of nature set the stage for their accounts of life in society"⁷.

Despite of all these very different resources and the empirical necessity, as no political science analysis exists, the inquiry advanced here has a twofold objective. To begin with, to provide evidence that by studying arts in dictatorial and post-dictatorial regimes (micro-approach) we can find out more about the regime themselves, about the modalities in which they are assembled and, in the same time on their inbuilt inconsistencies. We need to study the way societies perceive the life under dictatorships and the way they react to the constant changes after 1990 as transmitted through the means of the arts and their symbolic tactics. This complementary study can enrich our

¹ Murray EDELMAN, *From Art to Politics. How Artistisc Creations Shape Political Conceptions*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1995, p. 7.

² *Ibidem*, p. 44.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 143.

⁴ Charles HERSCH, *Democratic Artworks. Politics and the Arts from Trilling to Dylan*, SUNY Press, SUNY, 1998, pp. 1, 7.

⁵ Joel KASSIOLA, "Political Values and Litterature: The Contribution of Virtual Experience", in Maureen WHITEBROOK (ed.), *Reading Political Stories. Representations of Politics in Novels and Pictures*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Boston, 1992, pp. 53-72/p. 58.

⁶ Lee SIGELMAN, "Taking Popular Fiction Seriously", in Maureen WHITEBROOK (ed.), *Reading Political Stories...cit.*, pp. 149-163, pp. 153, 155.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

understanding of these regimes by including the *non-dits* of political science studies that ignore the reflections of these regimes in their citizens' perceptions, examined here through the means of works of art.

*The Studies of Art in Postcommunism:
Institutions and Artistic Discourses, Memory*

Communist states were over-determined ideologically and any artistic gesture gained easily a political value or a political signification because of the over-stratification of meanings. Artists were submitted to the ideological and institutional control of the communist regimes. For example one could only create art if he or she was member of the official professional institutions: the creative unions established by the states in accordance with the imported Socialist Realist ideology. After the transition to democracy in 1990, the role of the state in the artistic space was not discussed and thus, is still very present. This connection to the past through the state has been questioned by many contemporary artists who developed in the new context in which a plurality of organizations and foundations accompany a nascent art market. The way the past is constructed by the post-89 governments has been interrogated by artistic discourses which try to offer multiple interpretations of the traumatic recent past. The deceiving democratic experience and the ongoing problems entailed by the market logic (and the recent economic crisis) have also provoked artistic responses that prove helpful in our understanding of the limits of democratic consolidation in the countries of Eastern Europe. The artistic reinterpretation of the recent past has been a constant of the last years and it is seen in all sorts of supports: from films to visual arts, theater plays, music, etc. The constant interest for artistic understandings of the political in former communist states¹ is acknowledged in the following articles.

As such, one of the topics of analysis of the postcommunist landscapes is that of the artistic institutional reconstructions or transformations, the recoveries and continuities, the changes, and the non-democratic enclaves. Two of the articles included in this special number discuss the Romanian case from the perspective of two institutional transformations: that of the Union of Visual Artists (UAP), and that of the National Center of Cinematography (CNC). Cristina Stoenescu's article analyzes the case of visual arts in Romania and of its specific professional union of artists, the UAP, as well as its transformation after 1990 showing the "incoherence of decision-making levels that could be used according to circumstances". Her article examines in addition the artistic discourse of Dan Perjovschi, one of the most appreciated Romanian contemporary artists. His artwork is socially and politically (re)active and mixes the communist past with global politics. As the author recalls, the recent situation created by the UAP sees a return to totalitarian practices, as "today [again] artists go back to their apartments, or in their private spaces, reminding us of the confusion between the public and private space during the communist regime". Elena Arhire's discussion of the National Center of Cinematography (CNC) in Romania highlights the continuities with the former communist institution and the

¹ See for example the recent exhibition organized at the New Museum of New York, "Ostalgia" (6 July-2 October 2011) and its accompanying catalogue: Jarrett GREGORY, Sarah VALDEZ (eds.), *Ostalgia*, New Museum, New York, 2011.

problems brought by these permanencies in the establishment of a new industry of film. As the author shows this new institution was new only by name as it continued a communist institution (which at its turn continued a pre-communist institution) and the independence of Romanian film was made by the state through a form of economic censorship.

In fact, the modification of control mechanisms such as censorship is observed by several authors: from a political, ideologically determined censorship to an economical, punitive one. Artistic discourses register the changes of the political and economic systems as well as the continuous problems; such as the transformation of censorship, from a political instrument to an economic reality. The safe distance in relation to a past not completely absorbed by societies leads to the creation of what I call "art of memorialization", that is the construction through artistic means of another discourse on the past than the officially sanctioned one¹.

Visual arts examples are considered by several articles included in this special issue. As such, Amy Charlesworth evokes "the role of artist as 'ethnographic reporter' of sorts" through her writing on *Warte Mal!* the work of Ann-Sofi Siden. Charlesworth incites us to acknowledge once again "the specificity of the aesthetic as a device to see differently through a re-organized register" and "how there are always new ways to live in the fissures of our changed nation states". Moreover, Simon Bell in his article, "Laibach and the NSK: Ludic Paradigms of postcommunism" analyzes the work of a Slovenian artistic group, Laibach that, "deny and re-affirm...the post-socialist artist as a caricature or degeneration of Socialist Realism and socialist culture". The author underlines "this transgressive space of 'moral suspension'" in the Slovenian context evoking phenomena that are applicable to other postcommunist contexts. Identity reconstruction in the aftermath of communism is the topic of the article signed by Tijen Tunalı. The argument focuses on the misrepresentation of the Roma and their own conceptualization through an analysis of the organization of the 52nd Venice Biennale and of the works included in this first pavilion dedicated to the Roma.

Memory and the rearticulation of practices in the aftermath of communism can be understood through several of the articles included in this special issue. Artistic remembrance of the past can be first seen in the form of what Igor Golomstock called "ideology in stone"², that is, the architectural and monumental translations of the ideological projects and what remains of their traces in the continuous present. The article of Elena Gkartzonika analyzes the changes of signification of two such monuments in Bulgaria and respectively nowadays Kosovo under the call to "Forget your past". Parallels with other communist countries can be drawn if one thinks of the protochronist discourse in Ceaușescu's Romania and for example the 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian state staged by Živkov's daughter. Zoran Poposki's article introduces the difficulty to articulate a public space in postcommunist times through a discussion of the case of Skopje and a *détournement de signes* the author himself stages. The over-domination of the public space by commercial banners and billboards (so familiar to Romanians) is questioned and intervened by a series of artistic works.

¹ See in this sense my discussion of the Romanian case in: "Looking at the Past through an Artistic Lens: Art of Memorialization", in *History of Communism in Europe. Politics of Memory in Post-communist Europe*, new series, vol. 1, Zeta Books, București, 2010, pp. 129-148.

² Igor GOLOMSTOCK, *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy, and the People's Republic of China*, Collins Harvill, London, 1990.

Filmic discourses are also important in postcommunism as Andrei Poamă's article about the well-known film directed by Emir Kusturica, *Underground* (1995) reminds us. Memory and the reconstruction of meanings are present as well in this Balkan fantastic ride. As Poamă shows, *Underground* has a polyvalent meaning criticizing propaganda and the "*ubuesque* power as a synonym of the grotesque" which keeps people captive in the underground. The space created by the filmic discourse is, in the author's opinion, a "total common space" which is a homogenous, transparent space where the new man was born and upon which the dictator exerts his power. Moreover, Florentina Andreescu analyzes in her essay the alteration of the image of the woman in Romanian film before and after the revolution of 1989. The image of the woman that has to sacrifice itself is the focus of Andreescu's article but her analysis further takes on the issue of the social trauma provoked by the drastic change of 1989 and its evocation through film.

Finally, the analysis of how the meaning of political art is transformed with the change of regime is the topic of Alina Asavei's article. Asavei denies the political value of politicized art or official art as it was put forward by the communist regimes in Eastern Europe which labeled Socialist Realist art as eminently political. The author considers that on the contrary, only art that subverts or contradicts the status-quo is truly political. Thus, "unofficial artworks manifested their politics through various strategies of opposition: from the overtly anti-communist critique to the ways in which they indirectly opposed the official canon of art production, interpretation and distribution".